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A TWO-FACED NAVAHO BLANKET

By WASHINGTON MATTHEWS

As the American Indians are generally believed to be neither imitative nor inventive, it is well to consider a remarkable instance of their aptness in learning, and, added thereto, an example of their inventive advancement.

The whole art of weaving among the Navahoes is worthy of close study for many reasons, but not least for a psychological reason. We have fair evidence from the early Spanish explorers that they knew nothing of loom-weaving three hundred years ago. The Navaho traditions (and the evidence of these is not without value) corroborate such statements. They tell us many times that the early Athapascan intruders in New Mexico and Arizona dressed themselves in rude mats or garments made of juniper bark, which must have been woven by the fingers without mechanical appliances. But we have also the evidence of travelers of a still earlier date that the sedentary Indians who were neighbors of the Navahoes used the loom and wove fabrics of cotton and other materials. We have archeological evidence that the Pueblos and Cliff-dwellers wove, with the assistance of a mechanism, webs of cotton, yucca-fiber, feathers, and hair, and that they knitted with wooden needles leggings of human hair; for this purpose, it is thought, they saved their combings.

Three hundred years ago, then, the Navahoes knew nothing of the loom; but in the meantime they have become a race of expert loom-weavers, and they have accomplished this without coercion or any such formal methods of instruction as we employ; they have "picked it up." True they have had their instructors near at hand — the sedentary Indians with whom they have traded and intermarried,— but other wild tribes of the southwest had the same opportunities to learn and never profited by them. All had an equal chance to steal sheep from the Mexicans; but all did not become shepherds. The weaving of wool was, of course, unknown in America before the Spaniards introduced sheep in the sixteenth century; but the Indians were not obliged to change their old looms when the new staple was introduced.

Within the time to which I allude, not only have the Navahoes learned from their neighbors, the sedentary Indians, the art of weaving, but they have come to excel their teachers. Although blankets are woven in Zuñi today, if an inhabitant of that pueblo desires a specially fine serape, he purchases it from a Navaho.

While living in New Mexico during the years 1880–84, in daily contact with members of the Navaho tribe, I made a careful study of the Navaho art of weaving and wrote a treatise on the subject which appeared in the *Third Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, 1885). In that article I described all the important forms of Navaho blankets I had ever seen; but I had not seen a two-faced blanket, and, up to the date of writing, had not even heard of it; there is, therefore, no allusion to it in my treatise. I was absent from New Mexico, except during two short visits, for six years. Sometime after I returned to it, in 1890, for another sojourn of four years, I saw, for the first time, one of those two-faced blankets. Thus I may safely say that some time after I left New Mexico in 1884 the process of making this blanket was invented by a Navaho Indian, and probably, though not necessarily, by a Navaho woman.

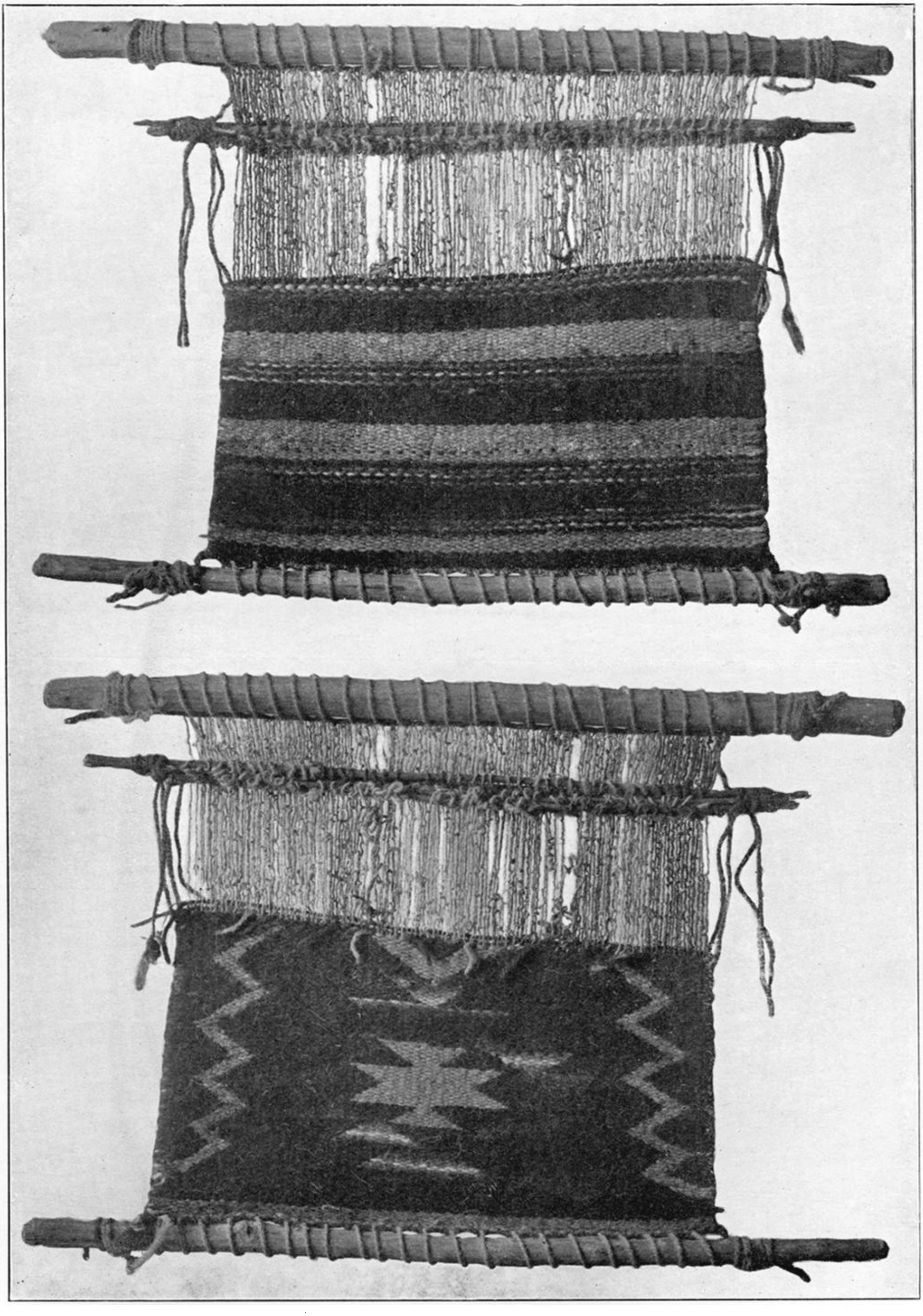
During my second sojourn in New Mexico I tried to find a woman who wove this peculiar blanket in order that I might induce her by liberal pecuniary promises, as I had done on previous occasions with other weavers of special fabrics, to come to my residence and work under my observation; but I never succeeded. I was told that the blankets were made in a distant part of the Navaho country; my informants knew not where. If there were more than one maker, I never learned: but from what I know of the Navahoes I think it probable that the inventor has made no secret of the process and that now, at least, there are many weavers of the two-faced blanket.

Someone may question if this art did not exist during my first sojourn in the Navaho country previous to 1884, and if I might not have failed to observe it. This is by no means probable. Everyone in the Navaho country then believed that the distinguishing feature of the Indian blanket was that, no matter how richly figured, its two surfaces were always exactly alike in all respects. Mr Thomas V. Keam, of Keam's Cañon, Arizona, is the Indian trader who has been longest established among the Navahoes, and is their most popular trader; he has dealt and dwelt with them, I think, for about thirty years, and he is an educated, intelligent, and observant man. Had such blankets been even occasionally seen among these Indians prior to 1884, some of them would have been brought to him to trade and he would not have failed to observe their unusual appearance. In 1896 I wrote requesting Mr Keam to get for me a two-faced blanket from his part of the country and asking him what he knew of the origin of the new blanket. In his reply, dated January 27, 1897, he says:

> As you suppose, it is only about three years since I first saw this work, and to date there are only a few who understand this weaving. The diamond or diagonal twill is undoubtedly copied by them from the Moki, but the double or reversible weaving I believe to be of their own [Navaho] invention, as I know of no other tribe that does such weaving.

Thus we see that it was not until about the year 1893 that the oldest trader in the Navaho land saw a two-faced blanket.

As I have said, the Navaho loom is a machine, and a rather elaborate machine too. The step from a tool to a machine marks a wide advance in human evolution. I have described accurately, in the paper already quoted, the mechanism of the



THE TWO SIDES OF A TWO-FACED NAVAHO BLANKET ON THE LOOM

Navaho loom (as it existed in the last decade, at least,) and have analyzed its component elements, which are essentially those of our own household loom. There is no doubt that the ordinary Navaho loom is an aboriginal invention which has not been modified since pre-Columbian days. In the weaving of belts, hair-bands, and garters the Zuñi women employ a harness or heald which seems to be derived from the Old World; but the Navaho heald is a rude, aboriginal device.

I cannot say what particular modification has been made in the loom (or perhaps I would better say in the application or management of the loom) to produce the new style of web, but it would greatly interest me to know. I trust that some of the many scientific explorers who have recently taken to visiting the Navaho land may find time to determine this and to describe it in technical terms. If the step from a tool to a machine is long, so is the step from one form or application of a machine to another which can produce such unusual results as we see in the specimen here illustrated (plate XXV).

Another thing worthy of note in this blanket is that we have here a diagonal cloth. There is considerable difference between the Navaho loom which produces this web and the machine which produces a plain surface. The difference is shown in the essay to which I have referred. As one might suppose, the loom that produces the twilled or diagonal surface is the more elaborate, and its manipulation requires the greater skill and care. This specimen shows that it is the more elaborate loom which the inventor has seen fit to modify for the new form.

But the specimen illustrated is not only a blanket partly woven; it is a loom, and a nearly complete loom, lacking only two movable parts (reed-fork and batten) which are common to all looms. Where is the secret, then? Why may not I, by merely examining the loom, tell how the change is made? I answer that I cannot do so without seeing the mechanism in operation. I might invent a plausible explanation and deliver it with an air of certainty which would impress you as the truth and yet be far astray. I should have to see the weaver at work and even then might find it difficult to analyze the process. This I know from experience. There are writers who can reconstruct looms and processes by merely examining the webs or the impressions left by these webs on plastic clay; but unfortunately this is beyond my ability.

I know of no fabric made by civilized man that is quite like this. I have asked experts in the dry-goods line if they knew of any and have been told that they did not. The modern golf-cloth, which is perfectly plain on one side and figured on the other, is somewhat similar in character, but not quite. I have no doubt that, were such an end desired, the American inventor would have little difficulty in producing a loom that would weave a two-faced fabric; but so far he has not done so. I merely mention these facts to show that the Navaho inventor has received no suggestion from either a European fabric or a civilized artisan.

There are baskets made by certain Indians of the Pacific coast in which the figures woven on the outside are quite different from those woven directly behind them on the inside. They are two-faced fabrics, but the work is done altogether by hand and so offers little comparison with the Navaho blanket-work which is done by machinery. I have never seen any of these two-faced baskets among the Navahoes, and am certain they do not know how to make them; but I cannot deny that they may have seen them and have obtained at least an art suggestion from them.